

# Wild Greens

BY CAROLE OTTESEN

Harvesting edible weeds from the garden makes weeding a much more satisfying experience.

**N**O, WILD GREENS are not a pro-environment political party. They are plants—okay, okay, weeds—that you can eat. My association with them began one fine spring morning some 40 years ago when an elderly man came into my Maryland yard and asked permission to cut poke.

Poke? Poke! An old Elvis song came to mind:

*Down in Louisiana  
Where the alligators grow so mean  
There lived a girl that I swear to the world  
Made the alligators look tame  
Poke salad Annie, poke salad Annie*

I followed him, mystified, to a fenced area along the road that had once been a paddock. He'd seen a mess of it growing the previous fall, reckoned it would be up about now. He pointed to a familiar weed I knew by its scientific name, *Phytolacca americana*, and indicated a tubular shoot with a gnarled finger. "You got to get it when it's like that—just a-comin' out," he said, slicing off the shoot with a pocket knife. "It's good eatin' but first, you got to boil it in two changes of water. It's poison, don't you know."

Poison! No wonder Elvis's poke salad Annie was mean. The old man left with a shopping bag full of it. "There's still plenty for you," he said. Not on your life, I thought.

Still, that spring as I fussed over my tiny lettuces and peas, I contemplated the irony of vegetables that grow tentatively, always at risk from drought or deer, slugs, or insects, while weeds like poke shoot up, robust and abundant. Of course, that's what makes them weeds.

The dictionary defines a weed as "any undesired, uncultivated plant that grows in profusion as to crowd out a desired crop, disfigure a lawn...." The phrase "disfigure a lawn" brings dandelions to mind.



Numerous common garden weeds make nutritious and tasty additions to the salad bowl.

## DANDELION

Dandelions (*Taraxacum officinale*) were well known in ancient Egypt, Greece, and Italy and have been used in Chinese traditional medicine for many centuries. Early European colonists brought seeds to North America with them so they could grow dandelions for medicinal purposes, and the dandelions found conditions to their liking.

The dandelion's fall from grace began in the mid-20th century, when they became one of the primary targets of our national obsession with pristine, ping-pong-table lawns. Yet despite decades of herbicide spraying and back-breaking hand weeding, these indefatigable plants still pop up in yards in all 50 states, Canada, and Puerto Rico.

The genus name, *Taraxacum*, is derived from the Greek *taraxos*, meaning

"disorder," and *akos* for "remedy." Both roots and leaves have been used as a purifying tonic for the liver and immune system and as a mild diuretic, a phenomenon that gave rise to the French common name, *pissenlit*—literally, piss in bed.

As well as substantiating earlier uses, modern research has found that chenodeoxycolic acid, a substance found in dandelions, dissolves cholesterol. Other studies suggest additional compounds in dandelions

While dandelions have not yet acquired the gourmet cachet they have in Europe, their popularity is growing, and dandelion farming has become a big business in the United States.

Vineland, New Jersey, has become the self-proclaimed "dandelion capital of the world," and holds a Dandelion Festival each year to prove it. "Vineland is famous for dandelions because it was a huge crop here, planted by Italian immigrants who



The distinctive yellow flowers of dandelions can be used to make dandelion wine.

lower blood sugar levels, stimulate immune cells, and retard tumor formation.

Dandelions' nutritional profile rockets off the charts. Ounce per ounce, the leaves are higher in vitamin A than broccoli, carrots, or spinach. They contain potassium, iron, calcium, zinc, and vitamin E. And their vitamin C content was great enough to keep employees in the early days of Hudson's Bay Company from developing scurvy.

established homes here," explains Dawn Hunter, executive director of the Greater Vineland Chamber of Commerce.

Dandelion greens are increasingly available at both farmer's markets and supermarkets, but why pay for them when you likely have plenty of them already in your garden? Gather the leaves during mild spells in winter or in the cool months of spring or fall when they are

## TIPS ON GROWING AND HARVESTING WEEDS

- Always positively identify weeds before eating them. Once you learn them, you can forage anywhere. "Most wild gourmet garden vegetables are the same all over North America," says wild food authority John Kallas of Portland, Oregon.
- Avoid harvesting weeds from any site that may have been treated with pesticides, or that is so close to a roadway that plants may be tainted by car emissions or road runoff.
- If you grow rather than forage for wild greens, give them the TLC you would any vegetable. Wild green seedlings thrive with light, air, nutrients, and room to grow. Enrich the soil with compost.
- Greens such as nettles, lambsquarters, and purslane get tough when mature, so treat them as cut-and-come-agains. Trim them back regularly to encourage tender, new growth. —C.O.

putting out new growth and before the plants flower. The flavor of the leaves, akin to sharp-flavored lettuces like endive, becomes extremely bitter after bloom when the weather gets hot.

Mix the piquant young leaves with milder greens in salads. Add crumbled feta cheese, dried cranberries, or chopped apples. Or combine leaves with other greens and sauté them in olive oil with a dash of balsamic vinegar or lemon juice. The flower buds and roots are also edible, and of course the flower petals have long been used to make dandelion wine.

## LAMBSQUARTERS

Like dandelions, lambsquarters (*Chenopodium album*) are an ancient food. The Vikings ate them and left a recipe for them, "Kokt Svinmatta." Grown in Europe since the Bronze Age, their leaves are a rich source of vitamins with 349 percent of the daily requirement for vitamin A and 111 percent for vitamin C, as well as folate, calcium, iron, protein, and dietary fiber. But they fell from favor when spinach, with larger leaves and shorter stems, arrived from Asia in the 16th century.



Unlike spinach, lambsquarters—sometimes called goosefoot for the shape of the leaves—don't peter out when the weather warms. That's when they take off, soaring to as much as six feet in rich, moist soil, but more commonly reaching three feet.

You can prolong the production of new leaves by harvesting frequently, or simply lopping off old stalks to stimulate new growth. The small young leaves, and sometimes the stems, are coated with a mealy white dust, giving them a gray cast.

Interchangeable in recipes calling for spinach, lambsquarters excel in a Gruyere

**A fast-growing annual weed, lambsquarters produce leaves that can be used like spinach in a wide variety of recipes.**

cheese-charged white sauce as a filling for crêpes. Or use them in a quiche or frittata alone or mixed with other greens. Stir fry them or mix them with ricotta cheese to make a filling for lasagna.

### NETTLES

Nettles (*Urtica dioica*) start growing in early spring before most other plants, a trait that makes them popular in cold places. Eating them is a spring rite in northern lands such as Ireland, Scotland, and Scandinavia.

Wherever they grow, it is with wild abandon. They spread by rhizomes and seed, and thwart eradication by stinging when touched. "Stinging nettles" raise ferocious welts on those with particularly sensitive skin. For these reasons, few people tolerate them in gardens, but they are easy to find growing wild just about anywhere—especially on woodland edges and in vacant lots. On the West Coast there is a regional strain identified as *Urtica dioica* var. *californica*, that is just as stinging and edible as the species.

Despite their bad rap, nettles are nutritional superstars, containing more than 25 percent protein as well as calcium, magnesium, potassium, selenium, zinc, and vitamins A and C. Herbalists value their medicinal qualities, particularly as a remedy for cystitis and for treating immune response disorders such as arthritis.

Harvest nettles carefully, using thick gloves, but be assured they lose their sting as soon as they are cooked. "To me," says wild edibles authority John Kallas, director of Wild Food Adventures in Portland, Ore-

gon, "nettles are a replacement for any green in any recipe. They're wonderful in lasagna."

Recipes for nettle soup abound. I find they taste bland, so I like to mix them with lambsquarters, dandelions, collards, or kale in a mess of cooked greens. Be sure to use only young leaves. Eating the older leaves, says Kallas, "is like chewing on rope—even when they are cooked well." This is not surprising, as nettle stalks were once used for making rope and a linenlike cloth.

### CHICKWEED

Another common wild green with nutritional value and a long history is chickweed (*Stellaria media*). An annual, it is one of the earliest greens available at the cool extremes of the growing season, often visible poking through snow in winter thaws. Chickweed is one of the most widespread weeds, occurring throughout the world's temperate and Arctic regions.

The common name derives from the fact that birds find it delectable. During Elizabethan times, it was fed to falcons. People still offer it to caged birds as a tonic, rich in vitamin C and phosphorus.

Chickweed is good for people, too. It has a nutritional content and cooked flavor comparable to that of spinach and a medicinal tradition that dates to antiquity. The Greek physician Dioscorides recommended it for eye and ear inflammation. Throughout history, it has been used in poultice form to treat inflammation and



**Gardeners may avoid nettles because of their sting, but once cooked, the plants lose this unpleasant trait.**

ulcers, and is still effective, crushed and applied to itchy, irritated skin. A tea from the entire plant yields a soothing drink for colds and flu. According to herbalists, chickweed contains saponins that emulsify fats, which may account for its use in folk medicine as a remedy for obesity.

Chickweed is delicate with small—about half an inch long—spoon-shaped leaves that

are rather widely spaced on prostrate stems. This tendency to sprawl makes harvesting difficult. Pinch the tips of young plants for a steadier supply of shorter, more upright greens. This will also delay formation of the tiny white flowers.

Chickweed favors moist, rich soil and is very easy to identify. A line of fine hairs runs down only one side of the stem until it hits a leaf, then switches to the other side. Eat it raw as a pretty addition to salads or blended with basil or parsley as part of an excellent pesto. In her book *Backyard Foraging*, Ellen Zachos suggests it's "an excellent substitute for sprouts or shredded lettuce" on sandwiches.

### PURSLANE

In the same family as chickweed, purslane (*Portulaca oleracea*) is a succulent annual weed that favors hot, sandy soil. It is frequently found in the cracks in sidewalks in midsummer at precisely the time when many other greens disappear or become too bitter to eat. The spoon-shaped mucilaginous leaves and round, succulent stems comprise the greatest source of omega-3 fatty acids in the green world. Purslane also contains more beta-carotene and six times more vitamin E than spinach, along with iron, high levels of magnesium and potassium, and vitamins C and A.

Purslane's primary use throughout history and the world was as a food plant. Ancient Egyptians prized it, and it is still



**Chickweed (above) and purslane (right) are both low-growing annual weeds, but the former thrives in cool, moist conditions, while the latter prefers it warm and dry.**



used in traditional dishes in India and the Middle East. Although it wasn't grown in Europe until about the 16th century, by the mid-18th century, Martha Washington was pickling it in the New World. Mexicans call it *verdolaga* and use it in soups, tortillas, and omelets. And, mixed in equal parts with sorrel (*Rumex acetosa*), purslane is an okralike component of the classic French *bonne femme* soup.

Young purslane leaves and shoots enliven salads with a citrusy tang. Older shoots and leaves are fine as a potherb, and

a few cooks still pickle them for winter salads. Some people plant purslane or golden purslane (*P. sativa*), which has larger yellow leaves and grows more upright. Others find just enough wild plants in cracks in the sidewalks and along the patio to enjoy for summer meals. As weeds go, purslane is generally well-behaved.

### A WEED YOU LOVE TO HATE

A European native biennial, garlic mustard (*Alliaria petiolata*), is a nuisance in gardens, but its real threat is as an escapee

just the stems and leaves, to prevent the plants from regrowing.

Garlic mustard's flavor is a robust blending of its namesakes. Add it raw to hearty sandwiches, include it in pesto, or let its lusty flavor star in a stuffing for pork roast or roast beef. Or, lightened up by mixing with lambsquarters or spinach and onions, it makes an excellent side dish for lamb.

### GRAZING THE GARDEN

There is beautiful economy in weeding the garden and in so doing, putting tasty and

## Resources

**Backyard Foraging** by Ellen Zachos. Storey Publishing, North Adams, MA, 2013.

**The Encyclopedia of Edible Plants of North America** by Francois Couplan and James A. Duke. Keats Publishing, New Canaan, CT, 1998.

**Feasting Free on Wild Edibles** by Bradford Angier. Stackpole Books, Mechanicsburg, PA, 2001.

**The Herbal Epicure** by Carole Ottesen. Ballantine Wellspring, NY, 2001.

**Edible Wild Plants: Wild Foods From Dirt To Plate** by John Kallas, Gibbs Smith, Layton, UT, 2010.

**The Wild Vegetarian Cookbook** by Steve Brill. Harvard Common Press, Boston, MA, 2002.

## Seed Sources for Wild Greens

**Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Co.**, Mansfield, MO. (417) 924-8917. [www.rareseeds.com](http://www.rareseeds.com).

■ Nettles, others.

**Garden Medicinals and Culinaries**, Earlsville, VA. (434) 964-9113. [www.gardenmedicinals.com](http://www.gardenmedicinals.com).

■ Dandelions, garlic mustard, nettles, purslane.

**Richters Herbs**, Goodwood, ON, Canada. (905) 640-6677. [www.richters.com](http://www.richters.com).

■ Lambsquarters, nettles, dandelions, purslane.

**Southern Exposure Seed Exchange**, Mineral, VA. (540) 894-9480. [www.southernexposure.com](http://www.southernexposure.com).

■ Purslane



Highly invasive garlic mustard was first introduced from Europe as a food plant. Its strong-flavored foliage should be harvested before its flowers appear atop its stems in spring.

in natural areas. In North America, garlic mustard is a noxious invasive throughout the eastern half of the continent, as well as in many central and western states. In rich, moist, shady places, it spreads swiftly, crowding out native understory plants.

Given that garlic mustard is highly nutritious—full of vitamins along with iron, calcium, and omega-3 fatty acids—it is doubly satisfying to pull and eat this plant. The most tender, best-tasting leaves are the first-year rosettes and the small, scalloped leaves on the stalk, harvested before the terminal clusters of white flowers develop. If you are foraging in the wild, pull as many plants as you can, being sure to remove the roots, not

nutritious foods on your table. Once you start harvesting wild greens, you may find your views of vegetable gardening altered.

You may never grow spinach again, instead choosing to pick the lambsquarters that arrive on their own. You may never again bother raising endive when dandelion greens are readily available. And on those long January evenings, instead of poring over seed catalogs you may choose to read about other weedy and wild candidates—such as fiddlehead ferns, sorrel, prickly pear cactus, and kudzu—for future culinary efforts.

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